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ABSTRACT

The limited research that exists about sibling relationships during adulthood has employed primarily sociological variables. Psychological aspects of the sibling relationship were explored in a sample of 35 women and 9 men with a mean age of 59. Subjects completed the California Psychological Inventory, the Scale of Sibling Relationships, and the Semantic Differential of Sibling Relationships with regard to their closest sibling. Data analyses revealed four personality configurations, two of which involved personalities more likely to report sibling rivalry or hostility. Results indicated that people who were hostile toward their siblings were characterized as cautious, rigid, anxious, stereotyped and conventional. Other correlations implied that the perception of a sibling as being jealous of oneself was characteristic of serious, self-assured, outgoing, sincere, stable individuals. Outgoing, creative individuals who valued intellectual achievement reported more cultural activities with their siblings. The final configuration that emerged concerned domestically-related activities shared with siblings; this factor was positively correlated with sociability and well-being. Results support the view that personality variables are important considerations in attempting to understand the quality of sibling relationships, especially in the areas of sibling rivalry and shared activities. (Author/NRB)

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PERSONALITY AND ADULT SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:

A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Personality and Adult Sibling Relationships: A Preliminary Study

Most studies concerned with siblings have examined the effect of variables such as birth order and family size on the individual (Schachter, 1964; Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1970) rather than focusing on the sibling relationship itself. The limited literature that is specifically concerned with the sibling relationship during adulthood has employed primarily sociological variables, and has produced conflicting results attributable to theoretical and methodological differences. Cumming and Henry (1961), for example, reported that sibling relationships in later life were surprisingly salient. They noted that when sibling relationships were missing, more substitutes were made than was the case for missing relationships with one's children. Their findings, as well as those of Sussman (1960) and Lowenthal, Thurnher, Chiriboga, and Associates (1975), indicated that sibling interaction rates remained constant throughout midlife. On the other hand, Rosenberg and Anspach (1973) reported that sibling interaction rates were consistently low throughout adulthood and that they declined significantly after age sixty-five. Rosencranz, Pihlblad and McNevin (1968), Youmans (1963), and Willmott and Young (1957) found that sibling interactions occurred less frequently than interactions between older people and their children and that the rate of sibling interaction was contingent upon residential proximity.

A few sociological studies have reported on the influence of marital status and sex of siblings on sibling relationships. Shanas, Townsend, Wedderburn, Friis, Mulhoj, & Stehouver (1968) noted that never-married people tended to maintain the closest relationships with siblings. Adams (1968), Cummings and Schneider (1961), Irish (1964), and Reiss (1962) observed that the sister-sister tie seemed to be

the strongest with the sister-brother and brother-brother ties following in that order.

Since most studies of sibling relationships focus on sociological aspects, a lack of balance exists in current conceptualizations on this topic. Sociologists working in this field have at least implicitly recognized this problem. Rosow (1976), in a sociological study of the integration of the aged into various social networks, discovered, for instance, that emotional dependence on adult children was a psychological variable, independent of the sociological factors employed in his study. In addition, Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972) suggested that quality or type of interaction, rather than quantity, is important to the salience of social networks. Conflicting results of the sociological studies of interaction rates between adult siblings also suggest that significant parameters are unaccounted for, possibly due to the exclusion of psychological variables. This is particularly pertinent since studies measuring one psychological variable, feelings of affection or closeness between siblings, have consistently demonstrated the substantial salience of this relationship (Allan, 1977; Bowerman & Dobash, 1976; Cicerelli, 1980a,b; Ross & Milgram, 1980). Thus there appears to be a need for a more psychological approach to the study of the quality of kin relationships, among them the sibling relationship.

Few studies have examined psychological aspects of the sibling relationship. Lowenthal and her associates (1975), in their work focusing on stress and adaptation at four critical stages, touched briefly on the topic of sibling relationships. They noted that perception of siblings remained relatively unchanged over the life cycle. Perceptions of same sex siblings tended to be characterized by rivalry and ambivalence, while the cross-sex sibling was viewed more positively. Croake and Hayden (1980) also reported some trait dissimilarity in sibling dyads

as a function of age and sex. However, this study did not investigate the impact of the personalities of siblings on the quality of the relationship.

Two theoretical approaches, psychological in nature, are relevant in analyzing the quality of sibling relationships. First, social learning and role theories, (Brim & Wheeler, 1966; Mischel, 1970) emphasize the effects of social roles, social and historical changes, and situational factors on behavior. Studies of adult development have suggested substantive changes in personality as individuals adjust to crises occurring in various stages (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1978; Lowenthal et al., 1975). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that changes in the sibling relationship would also occur in response to significant events, such as marriage or the death of a spouse. Social learning theory may also be useful in studying the sibling relationship by focusing on the relative importance of siblings as role models during adulthood. On the basis of studies with children (Bigner, 1972; Cicirelli, 1972; Kahn, Mahrer, & Bornstein, 1970), Rothbart (1980) has suggested that siblings may provide potent role models for adaptation to stresses occurring during adulthood.

The second perspective focuses on stable dimensions of personality as important factors affecting social and ecological variables in adulthood (Havighurst, 1968; Neugarten, 1977; Noberini & Neugarten, 1975). For example, in a study designed to test the merits of two contrasting social role theories of adjustment to aging, Neugarten, Havighurst and Tobin (1968), found that one of the most significant factors determining adjustment was personality. Thus, critical personality characteristics may serve as intervening variables in determining the quality of adult sibling relationships. Furthermore, personality traits may mediate the extent to which siblings serve as role models. Bandura's research (1971) demonstrated that

imitation was contingent upon the extent to which the individual identified with the role model. Thus one of the essential factors that may mediate the extent to which a person uses a sibling as a role model is the extent to which the personalities of the two individuals are similar and/or compatible.

The investigation described below represents a preliminary effort to explore the relationship between personality variables and the quality of adult sibling relationships. It was designed to begin to redress the conceptual imbalance described earlier, by focusing on psychological variables as they relate to the sibling relationship. Specifically, its basic hypothesis was that the quality of sibling relationships varies according to basic consistent personality patterns.

Method

Subjects

The subjects, consisting of 35 women and 9 men, had a mean age of 59.3 years (s=4.3). Over half the subjects (56%) had not completed high school while 34% had high school diplomas, 5% had college degrees and 5% had done some graduate work. Occupational categories were: professionals (16%), managerial personnel (16%), white collar workers (23%), blue collar workers (14%), and full time homemakers (30%). Seventy percent of the sample were married, while 7% were never married, 5% were divorced, 14% were widows, and 4% were separated.

Instruments

California Psychological Inventory (CPI). Personality variables were measured by the CPI (Gough, 1960). The CPI was selected because it meets the following criteria: (1) assessment of independent dimensions of personality, (2) utilization of a stratified standardization sample of normal subjects, and (3) determination of validity and reliability using rigorous psychometric principles.

The scales of the CPI are grouped into four classes. Class I scales measuring

poise, ascendancy, and self-assurance, include the following subscales: Dominance, Capacity for status, Sociability, Social presence, Self-acceptance, and Sense of well-being. Class II scales which assess socialization, maturity, and responsibility include the following subscales: Responsibility, Socialization, Self-control, Tolerance, Good impression, and Communality. Class III scales measure achievement potential and intellectual efficiency in terms of Achievement via conformity, Achievement via independence, and Intellectual efficiency. Class IV scales measure intellectual and interest modes; they include Psychological-mindedness, Flexibility, and Femininity.

Scale of Sibling Relationships (SSR). The SSR was developed by the authors (Brady, Mosatche, & Noberini, 1981) in order to evaluate the quality of the sibling relationship with the closest sibling via several independent dimensions. The SSR, a Likert-type scale, consists of 85 statements which the subjects rated on a five point scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The items on the SSR are divided into the following categories: Reciprocity, Positive affect, Role model for personality and lifestyle, Hostility, Cultural activities and interests, Domestically-related activities, Sibling jealousy of respondent, Respondent jealousy of sibling, Family competition.

Semantic Differential of Sibling Relationships (SDSR). The SDSR was developed by the authors (Brady, Mosatche, & Noberini, 1981) to describe the sibling relationship on the basis of Evaluation, Potency, and Activity dimensions, using the Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaun (1957) notion of the scaling of concepts. The instrument is comprised of 21 bipolar sets of adjectives.

Procedure

Subjects were interviewed at home by interviewers trained in the administration of the instruments described above. The SSR and SDSR were completed with regard to

the closest (or only) sibling of the respondents in order to obtain a relatively homogeneous data base across subjects.

Results and Discussion

The Pearson correlation was used to determine whether there were significant relationships between measures of personality, as assessed by the CPI subscales, and the SSR and SDSR factors.

The results of the global analysis indicated the presence of four interesting personality configurations. Two of these configurations involved personalities more likely to report sibling rivalry or hostility. The first pattern suggests that Hostility between siblings is negatively correlated with Responsibility ($r=-.27$; p .05), Achievement via independence ($r=-.26$; $p<.05$), Psychological-mindedness ($r=-.33$; $p<.01$), and Flexibility ($r=-.27$; $p<.05$). These results indicated that people who are hostile towards their siblings are characterized as cautious, rigid, anxious, stereotyped and conventional. The second configuration suggested that Sibling jealousy of the respondent was positively related to Sociability ($r=.27$; $p<.05$), Self-acceptance ($r=.27$; $p<.05$), Socialization ($r=.29$; $p<.05$), and Communality ($r=.38$; $p<.01$). These correlations imply that perception of a sibling as being jealous of oneself is characteristic of serious, self-assured, outgoing, sincere, stable individuals.

Two personality patterns were related to SSR activity factors. The Mutual cultural activities interests factor exhibited positive correlations with Sociability ($r=.30$; $p<.05$), Well-being ($r=.28$; $p<.05$) and Achievement via conformity ($r=.29$; $p<.05$). Thus, outgoing, creative individuals valuing intellectual achievement report more cultural activities with their siblings. The final configuration that emerged concerned Domestically-related activities shared with siblings. This factor was positively correlated with two of the same subscales which were correlated with the Cultural activities and interests factor: Sociability

(r=.26; p<.05) and Well-being (r=.32; p<.05).

Several other individual correlations were found to be statistically significant. Reciprocity was negatively correlated with Dominance (r=-.25; p<.05), implying that a supportive relationship does not characterize sibling dyads in which one person is aggressive, persistent, and independent. The SDSR Activity factor was negatively correlated with Communality (r=-.28; p<.05), indicating that restless, impatient, changeable, and nervous people view their sibling relationships as more active. Respondent jealousy of sibling was negatively correlated with Flexibility (r=-.29; p<.05), implying that individuals who are serious, cautious, and conventional emerge as those most jealous. The Family competition factor is positively correlated with Achievement via conformity (r=.26; p<.05), indicating that capable, sincere, and industrious persons tend to compete with siblings regarding their relative status in the family. Positive affect exhibited negative correlations with Self-acceptance (r=-.24; p=.06). These findings suggest that self-denigrating, confused individuals have especially positive feelings toward siblings who offer them warmth and personal reinforcement.

Taken as a whole, these findings clearly support the hypothesis that personality variables are important considerations in attempting to understand the quality of sibling relationships, especially in the areas of sibling rivalry and shared activities. The present study needs to be followed by research using samples covering the entire adult lifespan. In order to focus yet more clearly on the sibling relationship, specific personality configurations involving both members of the sibling dyad, need to be examined. The way in which personality similarities and discrepancies may differentiate between close and distant adult sibling relationships needs investigation.

Other psychological variables may also affect adult sibling relationships. Differences in intelligence, for example, are probably very salient to the relationship. There is a substantial body of literature to show that the ordinal position of siblings relates to the development of intelligence (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1970; Zajonc, 1976). Thus, the relationship between intelligence, personality and other psychological factors and the quality of sibling relationships during adulthood appears to be a fruitful area for further investigation.

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